

The Briefing



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Have we got the right Bible?

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The Christian doctrine of Scripture has always been under attack. It's really only to be expected. Jesus' teaching was attacked by his contemporaries, who sought ways to discredit him and the things he was saying (John 8:43). The apostles who took the gospel from Jerusalem to Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth were mocked and ridiculed as well. Some well-known to the early churches twisted what the apostles said and wrote, for their own ends (2 Pet 3:15-16). After the apostles were gone, Justin Martyr and many of the other early apologists had to defend the Christian appeal to the Old Testament and the authority of the apostolic writings (*Dialogue with Trypho*, chapter 29). Attacking the place of the Bible in the Christian life and in Christian thinking has a long history, and yet stubbornly (or faithfully, depending upon your point of view) Christians have insisted that these are the words that God has given us, and that they are to shape the way we think and the way we live as disciples of Christ.

The attacks have come from many directions, pinpointing specific aspects of the Christian doctrine of Scripture. The inspiration, clarity, utter truthfulness and sufficiency of Scripture have all been called into question, especially over the last 250 years. One element of Christian understanding in this area, though, has raised questions for much longer. How do we know that the Bible we have is the right one, or that it is complete? Who decided what should be included and what should be left out—and on what basis? For centuries Roman Catholic scholars have asked such questions as part of their challenge to the Protestant *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) principle. More recently, Dan Brown brought to new prominence the suggestion that the Bible we have is the result of an ecclesiastical power play, with bishops and church councils excluding texts that were, in one way or another, inconvenient. In other words, the church determined what the Bible would look like in order to support its own hold over the lives of its members.

These questions have usually been treated under the heading of the canon of Scripture. The English word ‘canon’ (not to be confused with a big gun, or someone who has a special seat in a cathedral) comes from the Greek word meaning ‘rule’ or ‘standard’. It came to be used in two senses in connection with the Bible. Firstly, the canon is the rule of Christian doctrine and practice, the standard against which all our teaching and behaviour is to be measured (the Old Testament operates in this way in Acts 17:11). Secondly, the canon of Scripture is the list of books that contain this standard and rule of Christian doctrine and practice (arguably this lies behind the use of the expression ‘the sacred writings’ in 2 Tim 3:15).

The canon of Scripture has been a hot topic in theological circles in the last ten years or so. We’ve already noted the contribution of Dan Brown to the discussion, but there has also been much serious reflection. Some have raised questions about the extent of the canon, and whether the earliest church really did consider the books we have as possessing a unique character.¹(#f1) Others have sought to redefine what we mean by canon, including a whole range of “materials, persons, and practices”. They argue that over the centuries the term has been inappropriately narrowed to refer to Scripture only, and it has been detached from the other ‘means of grace’ available. The result is that we have transformed something intended to assist us in spiritual growth into an intellectual criterion, a measure of truthfulness.²(#f2) So it is not only the shape of the canon, but also its function that has been the subject of debate.

Before we turn to look at the formation and the function of the canon, it is worth acknowledging some of the obstacles that stand in our way. To start with, there is the sheer ‘messiness’ of the historical processes, though any such observation needs immediately to be tempered by a confidence in God’s providential rule in the midst of the bewildering realities of human history. Nothing is hidden from our loving heavenly Father, and nothing overturns his purposes. Nevertheless, *we* just don’t know all that we would like to know about how the various documents circulated, how they were collected, when and by whom, and the criteria used by the leaders of the early church who sponsored their recognition as genuinely canonical. There is a lot of guesswork and supposition involved in many of the reconstructions of the process. Some questions remain controversial; others reveal a measure of disagreement even in the early church, such as the debate between Augustine and Jerome over the place of the Apocrypha (Augustine championed it, while Jerome insisted in his letter to Pope Damasus that “truth should be expressed from the Hebrew books”). Others still arise from our distance from the original circumstances surrounding the emergence of particular books—we really don’t know in the end who wrote Hebrews, and the lack of a name in the text itself may suggest that this is not important (though perhaps the first recipients knew and did not need to be told).

A second obstacle is more theological. The relationship in the early Christian centuries between the emerging church structures and this collection of writings has long been the subject of debate and controversy. Augustine famously insisted, “Indeed I would not have believed the Gospel except the authority of the Catholic Church moved me” (*Against the Epistle of Manichaeus called Fundamental*, 1.5(6)). Was his confidence in Scripture anchored in the authority of the Catholic Church, or was it the church that faithfully indicated to him where true authority lay? Roman Catholicism has long insisted on the first option, that without the Catholic pronouncements we would have no certainty about the content of Scripture—indeed we would have no Scripture at all. Protestants have understood Augustine in the second sense: that the church, when true to its calling, is a guardian of the truth (1 Tim 3:15). Standing under the authority of

the Scriptures as the written word of God, the church points inquirers to them, saying “Here is where the truth is to be found; here you will find the authentic testimony to God’s great and loving purposes, which focus on one central figure—Jesus Christ” (John 5:39; 2 Cor 1:20).

The pivotal figure of Jesus

It ought to come as no surprise that, just as Jesus is the central figure in the Bible’s message, so he is the pivotal figure when it comes to thinking about the canon. Jesus stands in the middle between the two testaments that make up the Christian Bible; he endorses the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament, and he commissions the apostles whose ministry produces the New Testament (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8).

Three pieces of evidence, none of them perhaps conclusive in themselves, accumulate to show that Jesus was familiar with, and endorsed, the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament. The first is his repeated use of the singular ‘the Scripture’ to designate a recognizable body of writings which bore a unique authority. Jesus regularly appealed to texts from the Old Testament in the course of his teaching ministry and in his debates with those who opposed him. He was certainly capable of identifying specific biblical writers (e.g. David, Moses) and particular parts of the Hebrew Bible. However, especially as John records his words, he could also speak more generally, even when citing a specific text, on which occasions he would use the expression ‘the Scripture has said...’ (John 7:38, 7:42, 13:18, 17:12). Whether the specific text concerned was from the prophets Isaiah or Ezekiel, or from the Psalms, all of it fitted under the general category ‘Scripture’.

The second piece of evidence is Jesus’ commentary on the history of Jewish hard-heartedness. In Matthew 23, amidst the seven woes to the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus speaks of “all the righteous blood shed on earth”, and then he elaborates with “from the blood of innocent Abel to the blood of Zechariah the son of Barachiah” (v. 35). Why these two examples? Surely there was innocent blood shed in Israel right up to the time of Jesus. However, the murder of Abel is recounted in Genesis 4, near the beginning of the very first book of the Bible, and Zechariah’s murder is found in 2 Chronicles 24.³ ([#f3](#)) Since 2 Chronicles is last in the Hebrew order of the Old Testament books, these two deaths in effect form bookends. Jesus is pointing to innocent blood shed at either end of the Bible of his day.

The final piece of evidence is the most direct. After Jesus’ resurrection, he met with two disciples walking to the village of Emmaus, and “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). The expression “all the Scriptures” points again to a familiarity with a category of texts which stand out from all others, while “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets” suggests an explanation that worked its way through the sweep of the Old Testament. Only hours later, Jesus met with the eleven apostles and spoke of how “everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled”. Then it says, “he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:44-45). The Hebrew canon was, even at this early

stage, subdivided into the Law, the Prophets and the Writings (with Psalms as the first book in the third subdivision). It would seem that Jesus both knew and made use of this way of referring to the whole of the Old Testament.

Of course, two centuries before this, Jews living in Alexandria had produced a Greek translation, the Septuagint. Some copies of this translation included additional sections and books, collectively known later as the Apocrypha. It would seem that Jesus himself made very little, if any, use of this translation—which is hardly surprising given his audience—and certainly did not refer to any of the Greek additions. What is more, in the earliest copies of the Septuagint that have survived, there seems no consistency about which books were added. The apocryphal stories may have been known (Jude's later, illustrative use of the 'Assumption of Moses' would seem to indicate this), but there is little evidence that these additions were generally accepted as Scripture. What is more, the Septuagint broke with the threefold division of the Hebrew Old Testament while, as we have seen, Jesus used that basic framework.

It might seem a little more difficult to suggest Jesus is the pivotal figure in the emergence and recognition of the New Testament. After all, as far as we can make out, no part of the New Testament was written during Jesus' lifetime. While it is certain that the Gospels are expressions of eyewitness testimony, no-one seriously suggests these accounts were produced while Jesus was alive.⁴ ([#f4](#)) However, the apostolic mission to Israel and the nations, and especially the character of this mission as fundamentally the testimony of eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection, arose out of his personal commissioning of these men (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8, 22). He sends them out, insisting the scope of their mission is "to the ends of the earth" and "to the end of the age". He promises to send the Holy Spirit to "bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). The apostolic writings emerge from this context.

It is no wonder that in later discussions the apostolic credentials of each New Testament document were a prime consideration. These men were the personally appointed witnesses of the risen Jesus. They were the ones to whom he entrusted the words he had heard from his Father (John 14:24, 17:8). Their authority derived not from some consensus of the faithful, or ordination by a group of leaders, but directly from the risen Christ himself (a point Paul must make repeatedly and at some length because of his separation in time from the other apostles: Gal 1:11–2:10; 1 Cor 15:8–9, etc.). The men Jesus chose spoke for him and of him.

But what about those books which were not written by the apostles, and those such as Hebrews which include no explicit reference to their author? Does the presence of such books within the canon raise questions about this insistence that Jesus remains pivotal to the shape of the canon, just as he remains central to its message? The short answer is 'no'. On the one hand, it has long been held that such books, though not written personally by one of the apostles, nevertheless were closely associated with them. So Papias, writing in the first half of the second century and described by Irenaeus as "a hearer of John" (*Against Heresies*, V.33.4), spoke of Mark as "the interpreter of Peter".⁵ ([#f5](#)) Luke, as Acts makes clear, was an associate of the apostle Paul. However, as BB Warfield argued in the early twentieth century, perhaps we unnecessarily restrict apostolicity when we insist upon apostolic authorship. What is really important is that Christ's apostles gave these books—some written by them and some apparently not—to the churches to guide their thinking and living as Christ's disciples in the generations that followed.⁶ ([#f6](#)) A key example is

the way Peter referred to Paul's letters alongside "the other Scriptures" (2 Pet 3:16). This is the *apostolic* deposit; this is what the apostles handed down to us.

From this perspective, it is easy to see how any suggestion that the Bible has little to say about the shape of the canon is deficient. It is only half-true to say that the table of contents is the one uninspired page in the Bible. The complex, and to some extent hidden, processes of the church's first three centuries did not take place in a vacuum, nor did the church leaders begin with a blank slate to which they could add the books they approved of while leaving aside the books they disliked. Jesus testifies that the Old Testament is the word of God (e.g. Mark 7:9-13), and his personal commissioning of the apostles as his ambassadors (2 Cor 5:20) set up the basic architecture of the Bible that we have in our hands today. The early church did not create the canon any more than it created its component parts. Instead, the early church received the canon as a gift from Christ. It did not invest these particular books with an authority they would have otherwise not had. Rather, they recognized that Jesus had indicated the proper testimony to himself, and provided the reliable word of witnesses to his resurrection.

Recognizing the canon

Despite some modern suggestions, it is important to realize that the Christian church has never been without a canon. The earliest Christian preaching appealed to the Old Testament for its explanation of what Jesus had done (e.g. Peter's appeal in Acts 2 to Joel 2, Psalm 16, and Psalm 110). The first disciples were almost all Jews, and were used to having a collection of authoritative texts which nourished faithfulness and against which all teaching was to be measured (Acts 17:11). Canon consciousness is not something that emerged in the fourth century. It was there from the beginning.

Within the lifetime of the apostles, specifically Christian texts associated in one way or another with them were being placed alongside the Old Testament, both read in the public gatherings (Col 4:16) and described as Scripture (2 Peter 3:16 again). In 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul quotes a saying of Jesus recorded in Luke 10:7 alongside Deuteronomy 25:4, calling both 'Scripture'. Most probably this combination of Old Testament and apostolic texts happened gradually. Paul's letters were written to churches in disparate parts of the Roman Empire, and it took some time for them to circulate as a collection (though once again there might be a hint of an emerging collection in 2 Peter 3:16).⁷ [\(#f7\)](#) It would seem that in the early second century the four Gospels were circulated as a set. Justin Martyr made mention of them, Irenaeus gave a rationale for why there are only four (*Against Heresies*, III.11.8), and the Gospels were so firmly embedded in the lives of the churches that Tatian could produce his own synopsis, the *Diatessaron*, around 170 AD. His aim was to emphasize the fact that, while there are four Gospels, there is only one *gospel*.⁸ [\(#f8\)](#)

We do not know the details of discussions about the canon in the first century or so of the Christian church. However, it would seem that the core of the New Testament was generally recognized from a very early date. As far as we can tell, no one seriously suggested the fanciful lives of Jesus produced by the Gnostics should be placed alongside the four

Gospels. The known letters of Paul were circulating to churches other than those to which they were originally addressed quite early as well. No official endorsement by a church council was required for believers to recognize in these writings the authentic witness of the apostles. Nevertheless, on the edges of the canon there were certainly questions. Some epistles of Paul were not widely known at first, and the books of Hebrews and Revelation were so different from the rest as to generate some comment. The earliest full manuscripts of the New Testament include books that were later recognized to be useful and edifying, but not canonical. The Codex Alexandrinus includes two letters from Clement, an early elder in the church at Rome. The Codex Sinaiticus includes the 'Epistle of Barnabas', and a work known as the 'Shepherd of Hermas'. This continuing discussion would allow Eusebius in the early fourth century to speak about the universally accepted books (*homologoumena*, which, it is important to remember, represented the vast bulk of the New Testament) and the disputed books (*antilegomena*).

Canonical lists did not seem necessary in the early years. After all, at its beginning, Christianity was a small minority religion with a relatively tightly spun social network (e.g. Paul's personal greetings in his letters). The various local congregations communicated with each other and shared documents (Col 4:16). However, as the Gnostics and others produced their own literature, and in response to challenges from those such as Marcion (who distanced himself from the Old Testament and any part of the New Testament that seemed to him too much like the Old Testament), lists began to appear. One of the earliest may have been the Muratorian Fragment (its age is controversial), which seeks to distinguish between writings suitable for use in Christian gatherings and those which are edifying but not canonical, much as we might distinguish between the Gospel of Mark and your favourite theologian or Christian writer.⁹ [\(#f9\)](#) The most famous canonical list is undoubtedly by Athanasius of Alexandria, included in his 39th festal letter to the churches of his diocese in 367; it received little or no dissent.

The early history of the canon is incomplete. There is a lot we do not know. However, what we do know points, not to wholesale confusion and a need for an ecclesiastical hierarchy to impose a canon upon the churches, but to a recognition that the writings associated with the apostles belonged alongside the Old Testament as God's word to his people. The vast bulk of the New Testament was recognized by all from a very early date, and the continuing discussion about a few of the books demonstrates a concern to distinguish the genuine witness of the apostles from other works that were appearing. Though the details are lost to us, they were never lost to the God who willed his people to have his word.

The discussion was reignited from time to time in the centuries that followed. During the Reformation, the Roman Catholic insistence that the church invested the Scripture with authority by declaring what was canonical was opposed strongly by the Reformers. Luther struggled with books which he considered did not 'drive home Christ', chief among them James and Esther. However, even he recognized he could not remove such books from the canon, and struggled with reconciling James and Paul all his life.¹⁰ [\(#f10\)](#)

Augustine had persuaded many in the early churches to accept the Apocrypha, and the Council of Carthage endorsed it in 397, despite the dissent of Jerome and others. For many in the centuries that followed, such as Hugh and Richard of St Victor, and even Cajetan, one of Luther's fiercest enemies, the issue remained unsettled.¹¹ [\(#f11\)](#) At the time of the

Reformation, a fresh study of the earliest Christian writings, combined with concern about what had been taught on the basis of the Apocrypha alone, reopened that old debate. The Reformers insisted on the Hebrew canon of the Old Testament, which they recognized in the ministry of Jesus and the apostles, while the Council of Trent entrenched the Roman Catholic commitment to the Apocrypha as ‘deuterocanonical’ (a term Protestants have strongly rejected).

In the nineteenth century, influenced by the work of Johann Semler, some redrew the canonical discussions of the early church in naturalistic terms, asserting that this was just one more instance of a religious group generating its own authoritative literature, and the results were an accident of history rather than the providence of God. Others would later overlay this with suspicion about the exercise of ecclesiastical control and a new fascination with the books that were never considered canonical (in many cases precisely because they presented something so recognizably different from orthodox Christianity).

However, what we do know of the early recognition of the canon, for all the historical ‘messiness’, builds confidence rather than undermines it. There are good grounds for an appeal to the providential work of God, who has ensured that his given word has been preserved and handed on to successive generations of his people.

Living with the canon

So why have a canon? How does it function? These questions overlap with the somewhat broader question of the place of the Bible in the Christian life. The Bible is the written word of God, given to his people so that his voice might be heard. It records for us God’s action in history and his purposes, which find their fulfilment in Jesus. It is critical to remember that the Bible points us beyond itself to Jesus—our study of the Bible is in this important sense a means to an end: that we might know the God who has spoken through the prophets and in these last days his Son. It is given as part of God’s grace towards us, part of God’s provision to equip us to live as his people in his world, and so is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16). These things have been “written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom 15:4).

This collection of authoritative writings, brought together in the way it has been, serves us in other ways as well. Scripture is the standard against which all Christian teaching and all Christian living is to be measured; the Bereans of Acts 17 were right. But we need to go a little further, and say that Scripture as a whole is the standard against which all Christian teaching and all Christian living is to be measured. The assembled texts do not just sit adjacent to each other, they form a unity, and that unity has important consequences for how we treat each part. The drafters of the Anglican Thirty-nine Articles insisted that we are simply not free to “so expound one place of Scripture, that it be repugnant to another”. The whole helps us to understand the parts, just as each of the parts needs to be taken seriously in order to understand the whole.

The canon is also a testimony to legitimate yet bounded diversity. God loves variety, and does not gift us all in the same way (1 Cor 12:4-7). Just so, we have been given four Gospels and not one, two accounts of the history of Israel's monarchy, multiple prophecies, and both Romans and James. None of these are contradictory, but they do enable us to see that commitment to the same truth does not mean we have to all mouth the same words all the time. It would be very easy to misunderstand what is being said here. The boundaries are firm; there are no other canonical Gospels beyond these four. But their distinctive approaches, though very evidently accounts of the same person and the same ministry, allow a breadth of perspective which is lost if they are too quickly harmonized.

No matter how helpful our favourite Christian author or preacher might be, the Scriptures stand in a league of their own. We must not blur the boundaries and canonize the pronouncements of our heroes. All things are to be tested, not simply as an exercise in determining what is true (though that is vital) but also as a means of growing in godly familiarity with the voice of our shepherd (John 10:27). This doesn't mean despising the other gifts from the risen and ascended Christ (Eph 4:11-14). There are many brothers and sisters from whom we can learn a great deal. However, we need to be alert to the danger of turning aside from God's preoccupations, avoiding becoming entangled with our own, or our culture's, or those of the guild of theological scholars.

How do I know I've got the right Bible?

Misinformation about the canon and its 'formation' has fuelled concern amongst some that the Bible we read is a human creation, shaped by the decisions of powerful interests within the institutional churches. How can I be sure that the Bible I am reading is not simply man-made? Though the conspiracy theorists have given the question a new edge, the Roman Catholic insistence on the church's role in establishing the canon has ensured that Christians through the centuries have already addressed the question. John Calvin insisted that Scripture is self-authenticating. As the word of God, it needs no authentication from individuals or institutions. Instead, the very fact that it is the word of God means that God speaks these words to us, something that is sealed to our hearts by the testimony of the Holy Spirit (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.vii.5). Questions about the canon are inseparable from other aspects of the doctrine of Scripture—its identity and effectiveness as the word of God, and the involvement of the Spirit at every point, from authorship through to collection, recognition, and its faithful reception by God's people today. God didn't leave the books of the Bible to fend for themselves, just as he didn't make the world and leave it to its own devices.

However, the person and teaching of Jesus must remain at the heart of any answer to the question. His involvement with both testaments gives us confidence that we really are dealing with something distinct from all other writing. The Old and New Testaments are together the written word of God. As the Old Testament testifies to God's purposes in Christ, so does the New. The Old Testament leads us to him, and the New Testament unfolds his significance for us as we await his return. Though to some it might sound too simple, we know we have the right Bible because this is the Bible Jesus gave us, through the prophetic writers of the Old Testament and the apostolic witnesses of the New.

Endnotes

¹[\(#r1\)](#) Craig D Allert, *A High View of Scripture? The Authority of the Bible and the Formation of the New Testament Canon*, Baker, Grand Rapids, 2007.

²[\(#r2\)](#) William J Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology*, Oxford University Press, 1998.

³[\(#r3\)](#) For a discussion of the difficulties with the Chronicles passage, not least the mention of Jehoiada as Zechariah's father, see DA Carson, 'Matthew', *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, edited by Frank E Gaebelein, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1984, pp. 485–486.

⁴[\(#r4\)](#) Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2006.

⁵[\(#r5\)](#) Papias' own work has not survived but a record of his testimony is found in Eusebius' *Church History*, III.39.15. The same testimony was echoed by Irenaeus in *Against Heresies*, III.1.1, and Tertullian in *Against Marcion*, 4.5.

⁶[\(#r6\)](#) Benjamin B Warfield, 'The Formation of the Canon of the New Testament', in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, Presbyterian & Reformed, Phillipsburg, 1948, pp. 411–416.

⁷[\(#r7\)](#) E Randolph Richards, 'The Codex and the Early Collection of Paul's Letters', *Bulletin for Biblical Research*, vol. 8, 1998, pp. 151–166.

⁸[\(#r8\)](#) Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels and the One Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Collection and Origin of the Canonical Gospels*, Trinity, Harrisburg, 2000.

⁹[\(#r9\)](#) Charles M Hill, 'The Debate over the Muratorian Fragment and the Development of the Canon', *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 57, no. 2, 1995, pp. 437–452.

¹⁰[\(#r10\)](#) Mark D Thompson, *A Sure Ground on which to Stand: The Relation of Authority and Interpretive Method in Luther's Approach to Scripture*, Paternoster, Carlisle, 2004, pp. 133–138.

¹¹[\(#r11\)](#) R Berndt, 'The School of St. Victor in Paris', in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*. I/2: The Middle Ages, edited by Magne Saebo, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 2000, p. 492. Cajetan is quoted on the subject in William Whitaker's *Disputations on Holy Scripture*, Soli Deo Gloria, Morgan, 2000, p. 48.

